POLICING IS NOT ENOUGH

Ramaphosa's GBVF response overlooks the care system survivors rely on



PROFESSOR DASARATH CHETTY



AN ACTIVIST holds a banner during a recent 5km walk along the promenade in Durban. The walk was organised by the Umgeni Community Empowerment Centre. | RAJESH JANTILAL

AT THE recent Child Welfare Durban and District annual general meeting, the national address delivered by President Cyril Ramaphosa was discussed.

The horrific discovery of 12 women's bodies dumped across the City of Ekurhuleni between July and September laid bare, once again, the relentless brutality of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) in South Africa.

Faced with national outrage, the president's speech demonstrated decisive executive action. It introduced sweeping criminal justice interventions: rapid detective mobilisations, forensic evidentiary management, strict bail protocols, and urgent municipal audits to remediate public safety hazards like broken streetlights and overgrown fields.

Yet, beneath the well-received assertiveness lies a policy deficit. The narrative concentrates almost exclusively on law enforcement, forensic backlogs, and municipal clean-ups. From the vantage point of non-profit organisations (NPOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), this posture represents a welcome, but insufficient, response.

By treating GBVF as an operational failure of police and laboratories rather than a multifaceted crisis requiring a sustained care infrastructure, the state has unintentionally sidelined the very formations that keep vulnerable women alive. South Africa does not suffer from a lack of strategic vision. The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF 2020–2030) was conceived specifically to break away from siloed, knee-jerk policing responses.

It established an interdependent, multisectoral framework anchored by six comprehensive pillars:

1. Accountability, coordination, and leadership.
2. Prevention and rebuilding social cohesion.
3. Justice, safety, and protection.
4. Response, care, support, and healing.
5. Economic power and autonomy
6. Research and information management systems.

The executive directives concentrated resources and political capital into Pillar 3 (Justice, safety, and protection), while paying insufficient attention to the remaining five.

While strengthening police dockets and clearing DNA backlogs are critical components of justice, Pillar 3 cannot function in a vacuum. Prevention (Pillar 2) was relegated to generic moral appeals rather than evidence-based community curricula.

Economic empowerment (Pillar 5) - essential to helping women escape financially abusive environments - went unaddressed.

Critically, Pillar 4 (Response, care, support, and healing) was also not mentioned.

The overlooked lifeline: Frontline NPOs and shelter realities

In South Africa, the state does not directly run the majority of frontline victim support services. Under statutory frameworks like the Domestic Violence Act and the Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP), the burden of survivor care falls squarely on NPOs and CBOs.

These organisations operate the shelters that provide emergency refuge; they answer the 24-hour crisis hotlines; they deliver trauma and psychosocial counselling; and they provide court accompaniment when terrified survivors must face their abusers. Yet, while there was an acknowledgement of community and faith-based organisations, the address provided no operational planning, systemic integration, or fiscal commitments to support them.

South Africa's care and sheltering sector currently faces catastrophic funding instability. Shelters navigate irregular, discretionary provincial grants and short-term annual contracts that frequently arrive months late, forcing safe houses to turn desperate women away. Expecting civil society to carry statutory social welfare responsibilities without dedicated, multi-year funding baselines is unsustainable.

The inherent limitation of the approach taken is that it acts strictly post-facto - it mobilises state power only after a woman has already been beaten, raped, or murdered. People agree South Africa cannot simply "police its way out" of this epidemic. Yet, the concrete mechanisms announced do only that.

Focusing on criminal justice while neglecting NPOs triggers a second-order systemic collapse within the courts. When a survivor opens a domestic violence docket or applies for a protection order, the threat of retaliatory violence spikes immediately. If local shelters are full or defunded, and NPOs lack the resources to offer emergency housing, food, or child support, the survivor is forced to return to the perpetrator's home.

Under severe physical danger and financial coercion, many women are compelled to withdraw charges or refuse to testify. As a result, expedited dockets and cleared forensic backlogs collapse before trial due to witness attrition. The criminal justice machinery grinds to a halt not because detectives failed, but because the social care net under the victim did not exist. Impunity continues, and cycles of violence culminate in fatal femicide.

Unfunded mandates and municipal deficits

The situation is compounded by tasking local municipalities with conducting women's safety audits and remediating physical hazards within strict 60- to 90-day windows. While securing abandoned buildings, clearing overgrown brush, and repairing streetlights are necessary environmental interventions, assigning them to struggling local councils without ring-fenced national grant funding risks creating hollow, unfulfilled mandates.

Across South Africa, municipalities are already buckling under basic service delivery failures. Treating GBVF through short-term administrative ultimatums addresses secondary symptoms while ignoring the primary root causes of violence.

The path forward: Balancing justice with comprehensive care

Government must realign its strategy with the full breadth of the NSP-GBVF. National Treasury and the Department of Social Development must establish protected, multi-year funding agreements for accredited shelters, rape crisis centres, and community counselling providers.

Civil society networks must be formally embedded into national and provincial security and justice command councils, linking police responses directly to safe house placement and court accompaniment. Moral appeals must be replaced by sustained state funding for evidence-based primary prevention and school-based gender equity education.

Tightening bail conditions and tracking dockets are necessary steps, but punitive deterrence alone cannot heal a fractured society. Frontline NPOs and shelters are as foundational to national security as police stations and forensic labs. We need a comprehensive response to South Africa's national tragedy.

Professor Dasarath Chetty Chair: Child Welfare South Africa (KZN) President: Child Welfare Durban and District.